

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 14, 2013

Agenda Item: Aunt Molly WMA – Pocha Ranch Land Exchange, Endorsement

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Preliminary Approval

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background

Although most of the Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area consists of riparian woodlands and native grasses, FWP also acquired a 70-acre dry land farm field when it purchased the property in 1979. In addition, the original purchase resulted in a 300-acre parcel on the WMA to which legal public access is extremely limited. At that time, both the seller and FWP clearly identified the need to exchange the WMA farm field for a portion of the neighboring ranch's lands along the Blackfoot River to both enable public access to WMA lands and to provide the ranch the benefit of continuing to cultivate the previously tilled hay field. Unfortunately, that final phase of the transaction was never completed.

Over the years, FWP has periodically leased the field to the Pocha Ranch for agricultural use but there is now renewed interest in finally completing the exchange. Both parties hope to structure a deal that identifies a parcel of private land along the Blackfoot River with a value equal to that of the farm field so that little or no funds are required of either party. The ranch has also expressed willingness to place a conservation easement on the farm field after acquisition to protect it from development in perpetuity.

Public Involvement Process & Results

The public has long complained about the difficulty of legally accessing the northern portion of the Aunt Molly WMA. FWP has met with neighboring landowners and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to discuss the project and potential conservation easements.

Alternatives and Analysis

FWP could take no action. Public access to a portion of the WMA would remain difficult. The ranch may or may not be allowed to use or improve the farm field under FWP ownership.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the Commission endorse further work to develop an equitable land exchange between the Pocha Ranch and the Aunt Molly WMA. The exchange would significantly improve public access, bring important riparian habitat into FWP ownership, and would improve the condition and productivity of a non-native pasture that currently provides little wildlife benefit.

Proposed Motion

I move that the Commission provide preliminary approval to proceed with negotiations and associated assessment and public review of an exchange of a portion of the Aunt Molly WMA for a parcel along the Blackfoot River owned by the Pocha Ranch.